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ABSTRACT

There is little critical agreement on the meaning of Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice." One must confront the mindset of the play that systematically dehumanizes, stereotypes, excoriates, and seeks the extermination of one group on the grounds that their existence is repugnant to the controlling majority. Such a mindset is the philosophical and motivational basis for genocide. Most critics have taken little notice of either the prejudicial mindset or Shakespeare's dissent. Does ignoring the primary issue of the play suggests subtle support for the view that does not countenance the outsider? The challenge both for teachers and students of the play is to strive to come to a better understanding of who they are, insider and outsider. It has been suggested that "The Merchant of Venice" and its author are anti-Semitic. The challenge of the reader is to see all of the anti-Jewish epithets in the play from both Elizabethan and contemporary perspectives. In the play's trial scene, the reader faces perhaps the most dangerous caricature of all. There appears to be a conflict between justice, represented by Shylock, and mercy, represented by the Christians. In reality, it is not at all clear who is the victim and who is the victimizer. Those who teach the play must insist that students explore society's intolerance of the individual. If an instructor feels willing and able to tackle the philosophical complexity of the play, education on many levels is a real possibility. At that point, prejudice can be challenged and perhaps even overcome. (LBG)

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Prejudice, Pedagogy, and the Play:
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Once upon a time in the green, idyllic world of Belmont, we would spend our evenings marveling at the "floor of heaven" that "Is thick inlaid with patens of bright gold" (The Merchant of Venice 5.1.67-68). In the days, we would gather in huge centers of learning to study the great poets of antiquity. Those who would teach would agree on the literature and the philosophy that would make a proper diet for eager minds. Those who would learn would have the sagacity to respect their teachers and the ability to decipher the cherished texts of their ancestors.

Such accord in the academic community and in critical perspectives on The Merchant of Venice is purely a utopian myth. In reality, there is little critical agreement on the play. One can read in it the humanistic Shakespeare, the mercenary Shakespeare, anti-Semitic Renaissance England, an evil Shylock and the merciful Christians, or the victimized Shylock and the hypocritical Christians. Above all, one must confront the mindset of the play which systematically dehumanizes, stereotypes, excoriates, and seeks the annihilation of one group of people under the brazen indictment that their continued existence is repugnant to the controlling majority. It is precisely such a mindset which constitutes both the philosophical and motivational basis for genocide.

Shakespeare presents this mindset with all his customary mastery. But admiration for the bard must not blind us to the truth. Generations of high school and college students have been presented with The Merchant of Venice as the product of one of the greatest poets of western civilization. We must consider the moral implications of this action. There is considerable textual evidence that Shakespeare may not have fully endorsed the searing hatred of his Christian protagonists, but the majority of critics over four hundred years have taken little notice of either the basic mindset or Shakespeare's dissent. Could it be that in ignoring the primary issue of the play, that in claiming that Shylock's Judaism is beside the point and is only an "exotic fact" (Burton 125), they are subtly supporting the mindset that will not countenance the outsider, that demands his annihilation, whether he be a Jew in Venice. a Catholic in Northern Ireland, or a Kurd in Iraq?

Why study The Merchant of Venice? Perhaps the critic Hans-Georg Gadamer can provide some answers:

> The isolation of a prejudice clearly requires the suspension of its validity for us. For so long as our mind is influenced by a prejudice, we do not know and consider it as a judgment. How then are we able to isolate it? It is impossible to make ourselves aware of it while it is constantly operating unnoticed, but only when it is, so to speak, stimulated. The

> encounter with a text from the past can provide this stimulus . . . Understanding begins . . . when something addresses us . . .
>
> The essence of the question is the opening up, and keeping open of possibilities. (qtd. in Lyon 145)

Gadamer tells us that we--students, faculty, and humanity--need to be "stimulated" to address our prejudices, academic, religious, racial, human. Surely such stimulation is dangerous. In response to the psychological dangers implicit in examining our prejudices, we may respond by an even more fervent need to scapegoat. But if we are ever to change, we must go forth from Belmont and ask the painful questions that urgently need to be asked.

Who is Shylock, and who are the Christians in The Merchant of Venice? Through the dual lenses of the conflict between the two, we may never come to a clear and certain position on these characters, but the challenge for ourselves and our students is that we must strive to come to a better understanding of who we are, insider and outsider, as uncomfortable as the end knowledge might be.

The respected critic Elmer Stoll argues with great force that the play is anti-Semitic and that those who deny this are guilty of "Bardolatry"--that is of loving Shakespeare so much that one is unable to accept the limitations of his mind and soul within his culture. According to Stoll, the critic Goddard was guilty of such an offense. Goddard writes, "The Christians

project on to him [Shylock] what they have dismissed from their own consciousness as too disturbing" (qtd. in Lyon 105). In A.D. Moody's text on Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice, he concurs: "The Merchant of Venice does not celebrate the Christian virtues so much as expose their absence" (qted in Lyon 105).

It is obvious that the Christians relish name-calling. Shylock is referred to frequently as the devil: "The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose"(1.3.98.); "lest the devil cross / my prayer, for here he comes in the likeness of a Jew" (3.1.18-19); or "A third cannot / be matched, unless the devil himself turn Jew" (3.1.69-70). At times, the Christians see Shylock in another perspective, that of a dog: "cutthroat dog" (1.3.1110) or "inexecrable dog"(4.1.131). But what are we to learn from these descriptive Christian epithets? Are they simply vicious examples of persecution of the outsider?

One's initial answer to this question might very well depend on whether or not one is an Elizabethan Englishman or a modern post-Holocaust humanist, whether or not one is a Jew or a Christian. The challenge of the play is for one to see all of these perspectives, to learn from our history (as embarrassing and infuriating as it might be), and to share in the pain of the other.

The stereotyping does not end with the name calling however. Shylock is as niggardly, as Spartan, in his speech and clothes as he is with his money. For instance, one needs only to compare

his simple black gabardine with the elegant robes of the Venetians. The adorned poetry of Salerio as he describes the potential dangers to Antonio's ships stands in stark contrast to the barren prose of Shylock when he comtemplates those very same dangers (compare 1.1.23-41 to 1.3.20-25). But even here, we are invited to examine our prejudices. Just as we might be tempted to be enamored of the Venetian expansiveness in speech, we are invited to consider the shallow bantering of Gratiano: "Gratiano speaks an infinite deal of nothing," (1.1.118). Further, we see the generosity of Antonio, who would put his life at risk for his beloved friend, Bassanio. Against this is the hateful image of Shylock who would see his daughter dead, and his ducats returned to him. Many would stop here; surely, Shylock is evil incarnate. But we must look further--further to the daughter Jessica who trades Leah's ring for a monkey. An alert reader would surely understand the significance of this action placed against the recurrent ring imagery and its meaning as a symbol of fidelity. Shylock, who vigorously endeavors to strip language of passion, responds to this betrayal with surprising tenderness: "It was / my turquoise; I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor. I / would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys" (3.2.107-109).

Finally, Shylock is not the only one who confuses love and money. What first attracts Bassanio to Portia is her funds: "In Belmont is a lady richly left;" (1.1.165). Lorenzo, too, the Christian who elopes with the Jewess Jessica, seems first of all to be interested in her money ; "She hath directed/How I shall

take her from her father's house;/What gold and jewels she is furnished with;" (2.4.32-34). And the way that "gentle" Jessica becomes a gentile is to rob her father--a highly ironic rite of passage from one religion to another. The play teaches us each to examine our mutual greed, our mutual humanity. Lest we think one people is superior to the other, Shakespeare invites us to ponder the trial scene.

Once again, the trial scene appears to be trading in stereotypes. We have perhaps the most notorious, the most dangerous caricature of all. But this slur will not go away if we simply choose not to view it. The only chance we have is like Jacob, to wrestle with the angel. If we survive, we may emerge free of stereotypes, with a new identity, a new awareness, a new need to go beyond the myopic cycle of victim and victimizer.

In this scene, the Jew , Shylock, demands justice, the letter of the law, and the Christians seemingly demand mercy, the spirit of the law. The Pharisees were stereotyped as demnading hard justic. In reality, Judaism involves a constant dynamic tension between ritual and ethics, justice and mercy, in an attempt to "make holy a wider range of everyday life" (Goldenberg 130).

Depending on perspective once again, one might very easily see a cruel, unreasonable Shylock threatening a generous, loving Antonio with the letter of the law, and in so doing, threatening the future happiness of Bassanio and Portia. From this

perspective, Shylock is the outsider, the senex iratus, who would threaten the community of lovers (Frye 178). Still from another perspective, Shylock is a broken man who has been stripped of his daughter and his money, who has been constantly persecuted. Who is the real Shylock. and what were Shakespeare's intentions?

Portia argues eloquently for mercy. Shylock insists on justice. But what happens when Portia and the Christians have their turn to grant mercy? In A New Mimesis: Shakespeare and the Representation of Reality, the critic A.D. Nuttall answers this persistent question: "The Christians in stripping Shylock's capital are doing to him what he wished to do to Antonio. The act of mercy has an inner likeness to the act of revenge" (qtd in Lyon 10). The Christians, in their vengeful act of mercy, take Shylock's identity to make of him a Christian (of course, the Christian Renaissance would have seen this as a great favor). Finally, in taking his livelihood, they take his life: "you take my life/When you do take the means whereby I live" (4.1.389-390). Antonio confirms this reading in the last scene of the play when he is told his ships are safe: "Sweet lady, you have given me life and living;" (5.1.306). The perspective is once again altered; the victimizer has become the victim. Who is the victimizer? Who is the victim? We are left to ponder this mutual chain of persecution. Hopefully, we will begin to look for another way and end the cycle.

Teachers can help their students move in this direction when they raise significant questions. What kind of society is it

that insists on the obliteration of the one who is different? Shylock joins the community, and in this sense he fulfills the limited dictates of the comedy genre. The senex iratus is no more. The job of the critic and the instructor is to question the vision of Shakespearean comedy. In another of Shakespeare's comedies, Kate repents that she is a shrew and is reconciled to her future in the community as a wife, but at what cost to her identity? Is it time for us, in this century, to question the structure of the "comic" universe that would destroy the threat of difference, of individuality? Those who see the tragedy of Shylock would agree. Those who teach the play must insist that our students explore the issue of the dominant society and its intolerance of the individual.

The Merchant of Venice raises important questions for the classroom, and so it is that I would like to end with the dialogue between teacher and student. It is in this context that I return again to Gadamer and his perspective on texts of another time and their ability to stimulate an examination of our own prejudices. Although our students need to be confronted with the contemporary diversity of voices, the past is still contemporary in its potential to ideally make us uncomfortable.

We should be uncomfortable, uncomfortable with our students' ignorance of Shakespeare and the Bible, of classical literature and mythology, of the simple distinction between a sentence and a sentence fragment. Although the reading and rigorous discussion

of Shakespeare will not solve all of our problems, it is a good place to begin.

As for the crucial question of the play's anti-Semitism, we can track actors' performances of Shylock from demon buffoon to tormented human being as a record of evolving civilization. We know that "To the Elizabethan a Jew was a mysterious and alien being probably regarded in much the same way as simple minded Americans today think of a Commie" (Burton 125). We may never know exactly what Shakespeare intended, other than a successful run at the box office.

What counts most of all is what happens in the classroom. It is for this reason that I urge a careful reading of the play on college campuses, a reading that will not simplify but will complicate, a reading that will invite our students to do what they most need to do--think.

After an examination led by Rabbi Richard Simon of the history of usury and the history of the treatment of the Jewish people in Europe in the Renaissance, my students began to reexamine their preconceptions. In short, they began to learn.

Under Rabbi Simon's tutelage, my students learned that after Pope Alexander II banned the profession of usury for Christians in 1179, Jews were forced to become moneylenders under threat of death. Frequently, as was the case of Aaron of Lincoln in 1123, the crown simply refused to pay back loans to Jewish moneylenders and simply laid claim to their entire estates. Such was the historical context for Shakespeare's Shylock. Students,

introduced to an historical underpinning for literary texts, learn on many levels.

In conclusion, I would like to present the comments of students in my Shakespeare survey class. One student, Norman Schmidt, writes eloquently, "Anti-Semitic literature provides useful insight for those of us who can learn from others how not to be." John Moberly adds, "Anti-Semitism is not going away just because we shut our eyes." Finally, a note of warning from Karen Conley:

> The wrong teacher in a fast paced survey course could allow students to avoid the philosophical complexity of the play. Thus, many students would be apt to leave the course with only a superficial understanding--while Shakespeare's hateful image of Shylock , the Jew, lurks still in the back of their minds, coloring their probably already tainted perceptions and prejudices.

However, if the instructor feels willing and able to tackle "the philosophical complexity of the play," education, on many levels, is a real possibility. For some instructors, in some classes, the play might not be an option; certainly, it should be taught with great care. But under the right conditions, we might very well travel beyond the make believe world of Belmont to a real society built on the vision that education is possible, and prejudice can be challenged and perhaps even overcome.

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